

Patton Revisited

*Two Personal Glimpses, Very Different Ones,
Of the Irrepressible Patton*

by Brigadier General Albin F. Irzyk (Ret.)

Patton! General George S. Patton, Jr. Who has not heard of him? His name still conjures up all sorts of images. Fascinating, controversial, irrepressible. The personification of tank warfare during WWII. One of a kind. The man of many faces. The subject of endless stories, Patton became a legend that, after all these years, still grows. What more can we say about him?

The Patton saga continues. Here are two personal glimpses — this time of two Pattons — two widely differing faces.

After battling a tenacious, sometimes fanatic enemy; heavy, incessant rains; sleet, snow, cold, and deep and unforgiving mud during November 1944 in Lorraine, the 4th Armored Division in early December had reached Singling in the Maginot Line, only a stone's throw from the German border.

Here, exhausted men and machines were relieved by a fresh 12th Armored Division — a most fortuitous decision by someone in light of following events.

For its rehabilitation in the rear, my 8th Tank Battalion was assigned the town of Domnom les Dieuze, about 15 km west of Fenetrage, and barely 2 km north of the Fenetrage/Dieuze road.

Domnom was a small, dismal, bleak, depressing town. The 8th arrived on yet another gray, rainy, cold, damp, miserable, penetrating day.

The manure piles in front of the half-home, half-barn structures were being soaked by the falling rain, which drained off into the gutters. The town was an altogether disheartening sight and prospect.

How this tiny town could absorb the men and vehicles of a tank battalion

was the vexing question. But it has long been accepted that one sign of a good outfit is the rapidity with which it gets dug in. And very soon the units of this outfit had found billets for their men and “spaces” for their vehicles.

It was not long before, all over town, broken tracks were lying on the ground, engine compartments were open, spare parts, tools, cleaning equipment — all the tell-tale signs of an armored outfit — were strewn around, as men worked furiously to get back into shape.

Late on the afternoon of the third day, I had an urgent message from my Combat Command, CCB, informing me that I would have yet another visitor, and it would be early the next morning. This was not just any visitor, but the MAN himself, the army commander, Lt. Gen. George S. Patton, Jr.

I was told not to make any special preparations for the visit, to keep the men doing what they had been doing, and to be on hand in the town square at 0900 to greet the general upon his arrival.

I immediately sent word out to the companies about the next day's visitor, and told them to continue their activities, as scheduled.

Of course, the word spread like wildfire, faster even than a hot rumor. The visit of old “Blood and Guts” to THEIR battalion became the exclusive topic of conversation at each of the mess trucks that evening. The comments and banter about the upcoming visit of the “Old Man” were amusing and G.I. “classic.”

The next morning, December 11th, was definitely not Domnom weather — it was sunny, bright, pleasant, undeniably Patton weather.

I immediately faced a wee bit of a problem. There was really no town

square in tiny Domnom les Dieuze. As I glanced about, I noted the small paved, open area outside the entrance to the village church, where the town folks gathered before Mass. Since the church was about in the middle of the main street, this spot would just have to serve as the town square. It is here that I positioned myself well before 0900.

As I waited, I glanced all about me. Everywhere I looked, the men were hard at work — every bit as busy as they had been the day before. There was one big difference: periodically, a man here, one there would lift his head expectantly with a quick, furtive glance in my direction — then back to work. Things seemed perfectly normal — but they weren't. There was an air of great expectancy — an undercurrent of excitement — totally invisible, but very much there.

Still one more time, I glanced at my watch. The hand had reached the five minute mark after nine. Suddenly, I was startled to hear a loud scree-e-e-e-e-ch way down the street, where the road from the main highway makes a sharp 90-degree turn into Domnom.

A jeep was trying to negotiate that sharp turn at high speed. It careened on two wheels, then righted itself, and without slackening speed, continued to streak toward me. A figure was standing in the jeep beside the driver, clutching the top of the windshield. Since he approached from the west, the early morning sun hit him squarely — like a huge spotlight zeroing in. But he was not dazzled; he did the dazzling. As he approached me, he reflected the sun — he actually sparkled. As he got closer — I knew the reason. I saw stars: three on the front of the shiny, highly lacquered helmet liner, three stars on each wing of his collar, three stars on each shoulder of his “Ike Jacket,” three stars on his riding crop, three stars on the



red, metal bumper plate, three stars on the small, gold-fringed pennant, which had been waving furiously from its holder on the bumper — there must have been 24 stars, at least. This was vintage Patton — the showman, the headline-grabber, the press favorite, the

flamboyant army general — but, also, the army commander esteemed and held in awe by his men.

As it reached me, the jeep screeched loudly again — this time as it came to a sharp, abrupt stop. I saluted smartly.

Behind me three huge farm animals the size of Clydesdales, previously unnoticed by me because of the excitement, who had been drinking at a trough, backed away, apparently startled by the noisy arrival. They turned and began lumbering up the street.

With a wide, crooked grin, exposing some bad-looking teeth, Gen. Patton returned my salute and announced loudly, "Ha, ha — I see that I've started a cavalry charge." With that he hopped out of his jeep and moved briskly up the street with me in tow and about a half-step behind. He stopped at every vehicle, at every cluster of soldiers, and had something to say to each — a question, a word of encouragement, of appreciation, a compliment, a wise crack, a good-natured dig. In an instant he had established total and complete rapport with these men. They were literally eating it up. He was a master at it. His stops were brief, and he kept moving. But in 30 minutes or so, he had "touched" virtually every man in that battalion. Those who were located in the back buildings or side streets had darted up for at least a "peek." His jeep had slowly followed him up to the far end of the street. Now he had it turned around. He slapped me on the shoulder, and exclaimed loudly, "Keep up the great work!"

Then he hopped up onto his jeep, grabbed the windshield again, and as the jeep started moving, returned my salute. The vehicle quickly accelerated and headed back in the direction from which it came and at the same speed. He stood ramrod straight, clutching the windshield with one hand, waving to the troops on both sides with the other — perhaps unconsciously emulating and reenacting the triumphant roll-bys of the Roman conquerors, about whom he had read so much, and with whom he empathized. The troops, of course, stood rooted to the ground, transfixed, bug-eyed. Then, with another screeching 90-degree turn, he was gone.

I was amazed at the tremendous impact that one man can have on a body of men. After his visit, troopers of the 8th worked furiously all day, as if with renewed energy, almost like the elves in the workshop after being visited by Santa, who had vigorously nodded his approbation. The men, as they worked, talked about nothing else all day, and as time passed the tales began to grow — some would eventually expand to legendary size, somewhat like the proverbial fish story.

The visit made the men almost ecstatic. There was no question now but that the army commander knew who they were, what they were doing, and what they had achieved, and had indicated his appreciation and approval of

their efforts. There is almost nothing in the world like pride, and they were handed a big dose this day.

The visit became even sweeter when they learned that the only units of the 4th Armored visited by Gen. Patton were CCB headquarters and the 8th.

The man who had visited them, although he had an abundance of color, was not merely a showboat. He had tremendous substance. He would soon

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prove that convincingly, for little did he know on this day that he and the battalion he had visited would in just one week have a great rendezvous with destiny.

A week later, on December 18th, units of the Third Army had orders to attack east. I had sent billeting parties forward to set up billets for use after the 8th Tank Battalion's approach march the next day, to be followed by the attack into Germany.

At 1700, the move to the east was cancelled. At 2300, the 8th was ordered to be prepared to move at once — to the NORTH! At 0050 on the 19th, the I.P. was crossed, and the tanks and men and the commander he had visited on the 11th were leading his Army on the long, treacherous, momentous, historic move to Bastogne (elements of that battalion, after traveling over 160 miles, would be IN and OUT of Bastogne the next day, the 20th).

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Years later, President Nixon, a great Patton admirer, would claim that that was the greatest mass movement of men in the shortest period of time in the history of warfare.

Now, let's "fast forward." The war is over — it has been over for three

months. The fighting Third Army is now an occupation army. Its combat commander is now military governor of Bavaria.

The 8th Tank Battalion is still in Third Army. I am the Kreis (County) Commander of Kreis Vilsbiburg, east of Munich.

Late on the afternoon of August 9th, I am called by division headquarters with unusual instructions. I am to take

with me a lieutenant who has served as a combat tank platoon leader, a captain who has served as a combat tank company commander, and to report to Gen. Patton the next day to discuss tank operations.

Of course, not knowing what to expect or what questions might be asked, I worked feverishly all evening trying to prepare myself for the visit.

The next day, we drove to Third Army Headquarters at Bad Tolz, south of Munich in a beautiful sector of Bavaria.

At 1300, I reported to Gen. Hobart (Hap) Gay, Gen. Patton's chief of staff. Gen. Gay greeted me most warmly, and had a staff officer usher us to the meeting place.

We entered through the back door of what appeared to be a small briefing room. There were folding chairs in rows. Scattered in the rear of the room were staff officers, apparently gathered to witness what was to take place.

We were directed to seats in the front row. Stretching in front of us, almost the width of the room, was a wooden table.

Just moments after we had been seated, a door opened behind the table, and in strode Gen. Patton, leading his dog, Willie, on a leash, accompanied by Gen. Gay and the aide. As Gen. Patton moved into the room, I inwardly gasped in surprise. The figure entering the room was far different from the sparkling, flamboyant, star-bedecked individual who had visited my battalion

at Domnom les Dieuze — just before our trek to the Bulge.

This was a subdued, aging gentleman — older-appearing than his 60 years.

He had aged perceptibly in the intervening months. I was struck by two



bones on his chest which appeared to be heaving slightly as he breathed. He paused momentarily, smiled his crooked smile, warmly greeted us, and told us to be seated. He was carrying a blue-lined tablet and a couple of pencils.

He sat down behind the table and immediately began asking questions and making notes on his tablet as he received answers. The thrust of his questions and the discussion were about how his tankers had gone about knocking out German tanks — how the lieutenant, the tank platoon leader, had employed and utilized his five tanks, the tank company commander his 17 tanks, and I my 70-plus tanks. This, of course, required a broad discussion of tank operations and tank tactics.

Time passed quickly. The discussion — questions and answers — flowed smoothly. In no time, it seemed, the shadows outside the windows began to lengthen. The afternoon was over. With that, Gen. Patton rose, warmly thanked us for coming, and strode out of the room.

The instant the door had closed behind him, I realized that I had just been treated to a rare, incomparable, unforgettable experience.

This Gen. Patton had been quiet, patient, kindly, gentle, warm, thoughtful, serious, deeply-interested, and low-key.

The session just completed reminded me of an aging college professor conducting a seminar for a small group of selected students. There was not a trace or whisper of flamboyance or bravado or a dominant personality.

I was now aware that I had been with and witnessed at close hand two Pattons — the Actor and the Man — the Actor at Domnom les Dieuze and the Man at Bad Tolz. And today I had spent the afternoon in the company of a Gen. Patton that most of the world had never seen — would never see — and did not know. This man on this day did not fit the pattern, could not step into the mold that he, himself, and the world had fashioned for him. For me, it was a most extraordinary, never-to-be-forgotten experience.

I would often wonder, but would never know, the fundamental reason for this meeting — why this great armor officer, this already famous army commander, would spend an afternoon discussing small unit tank tactics.

I wondered if it were, perhaps, to satisfy some curiosity. He was a fabulously successful army commander — widely credited with being an armor genius — whose skillful use of tanks had resulted in wide sweeps and rapid advances — whose tanks had brought mobility, maneuver, and movement to the battlefield, thus appreciably shortening the war. In many circles, he was already conceded to be the greatest FIELD commander this country had ever had.

Yet, he knew full well that his successes would not have been achieved had it not been for those individual tanks out front. When references were made to Patton's tanks, they were really talking about my tanks and those of the other two tank battalions in the 4th Armored Division, as well as the tanks in his other armored divisions.

So it was about those individual tanks out front that the discussion this day ranged.

Those individual tanks were really his army's building blocks. And how those building blocks operated against the enemy determined the success of his army. If the tanks were held up — stopped, that huge Goliath — Third Army — was stopped. Conversely, as they moved, so moved his army.

So perhaps on this day, Gen. Patton had simply wanted to study and talk

about the actions of his building blocks, which had helped make his army so successful and him a world famous military leader. Certainly, he had mapped the strategy, and with his sixth sense, his great battle sense, he sometimes asked the impossible. And we implemented that strategy and often did the impossible. Or, perhaps, he was gathering material for another of his issues of "Lessons Learned" or "After-Action Reports." Or he may have been gathering background for a book.

I would never know the real reason. But I DID know that on this afternoon I had had a profoundly moving, unique, rich, rewarding, never-to-be-forgotten experience.

To my great surprise and dismay I would learn that, not long after my visit to Bad Tolz, because of what his seniors considered intemperate, injudicious, and inappropriate remarks about the Russians and Germans, Gen. Patton was relieved of command of his beloved Third Army, and assigned to head a "paper" Army.

Incredibly, merely four months after my session with Gen. Patton at Bad Tolz, that great soldier was dead! BUT astonishingly, over half a century later, that figure is vivid, vibrant, and still lives.

Brigadier General Albin F. Iryk commanded the 8th Tank Battalion of the 4th Armored Division in Europe during WWII; served two years in Vietnam, the second as Assistant Division Commander (ADC) of the 4th Infantry Division; commanded the 14th Armored Cavalry Regiment at Fulda, Germany during the Berlin Crisis of 1961; and was Assistant Commandant of the Armor School, 1965-1967. He retired in 1971 at Fort Devens, Mass., where he was the commanding general. He holds, among his decorations, the Distinguished Service Cross. In 1994, the U.S. Armor Association awarded him the prestigious Gold Medallion, Order of St. George.